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Researching Family Secrets: Methodological Approach, Reflections and Recommendations

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Abstract: In this article, I consider writing by research participants as a method of gathering data on sensitive, difficult or shameful topics. In doing so, I draw on the example of a research project on family narratives and family secrets. Gathering data on hidden, uncomfortable or even painful aspects of a family's past and present poses several challenges in a research project: Most people are reluctant to volunteer intimate insights into their family lives and dynamics. Moreover, in an interview situation, it is challenging to create the kind of rapport that allows a deeper conversation. Writing has been used by a number of scholars from different disciplines to gather data. In the first section, I review these approaches, as well as their benefits and disadvantages. I then describe and reflect upon the methodological approach taken for a project on memories of family members' actions and involvement during the Nazi era in Germany. Finally, I offer recommendations and reflections when using writing as a data gathering method.

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1. Introduction

In this article, I consider writing by research participants as a method of gathering data on sensitive, difficult or shameful topics. One frequent challenge of research is gathering data on issues that participants do not share freely, such as failures, secrets and topics that feel uncomfortable and are taboo. Family histories and family secrets are examples of such sensitive topics. HIRSCH (1997) has coined the term *postmemory* to refer to a memory that is passed down to a person by previous generations. Similarly, "postshame" and "postguilt" might arise in subjects when the past actions of their parents and grandparents cause uncomfortable feelings, guilt and shame, even though they themselves were not personally involved. These feelings are also indicative of family dynamics and of owning one's story. Therefore, the aim of our research project on family memories was not to search for a historical truth or to compare the stories told by research participants with what is now thought to be accurate and the most likely course of events. Rather, the goal was to explore how difficult and shameful memories are silenced, hidden and yet still learned about, discovered and passed on in family contexts (LOHMEIER & BÖHLING, 2017). [1]

The article has three sections. First, I consider what is meant by *writing* in the research context and go on to present previous work that has employed writing as a method of data gathering, particularly when researching sensitive issues (Section 2). The third section focuses on the methodological approach of a project on family memories of the Nazi era (Section 3). Drawing on this experience, I offer recommendations and reflections when employing writing (in combination with interviews) to gather data on sensitive issues (Section 4). [2]

2. Writing as a Data Gathering Method

"As we tell and retell stories of our experiences with others, and others evaluate and interpret our experiences with us, we create a sense of who we are in the world" (FIVUSH, 2013, p.16). Stories construct identities. They situate the individual in group and collective identities by making sense of what has happened, thereby interpreting the past and creating a foundation for the future (HAJEK, LOHMEIER & PENTZOLD, 2016). At the same time, choosing words to describe what has happened and naming the course of events means positioning the storyteller and others who are also included in the story. Stories are passed on to others and also to our future selves: "Whether they are stories about ourselves, our families, our communities or our ancestors, stories provide an evaluative and interpretive framework for understanding how and why things happen as they do" (FIVUSH, 2013, p.15). [3]

At first glance, there seems to be a dichotomy between stories and memories. We do not remember in stories. Mostly, memory works in snippets and fragments. Recollections, sensations and experiences come into our consciousness, at times activated by an external trigger—a taste, a smell, a sound. Yet, when it comes to presenting and reconfirming identities and memories to the self and others, we do so in and through stories. Among others, FIVUSH has pointed to the power of stories when it comes to capturing autobiographical memory. Memories are ephemeral and often fleeting, yet they are also of great substance and go to the core of who we are and what we do on an everyday basis. They inform the stories we tell ourselves and each other (BRUNER, 1990; FIVUSH, 2013; RICOEUR, 1991 [1988]). [4]

With this in mind, writing as a way of gathering stories—especially on aspects of life that are not easily accessible and out in the open—is a very useful methodological tool. In addition, the activity of writing itself has benefits beyond the mere collection of data. Writing has creative, structuring and cathartic benefits that will be discussed in detail below. Drawing on RICHARDSON's (1997) understanding of writing as way of understanding, uncovering and finding out, CLARKE (2020) emphasized: "[W]riting *is* thinking and a process of discovery" (§6). At the same time, it can also be a creative act or a way to express highly complex and dense feelings and processes (HILTUNEN et al., 2020). [5]

For previous studies, researchers of various disciplinary backgrounds have employed personal writing as a data gathering method. In providing this overview,

my goal is not to share a comprehensive list of studies in which this method has been used, but rather shed light on the kinds of studies that make use of writing as a suitable and appealing method for researchers and research participants alike. What exactly is meant by *writing*? In the context of this article, writing refers to personal writing by research participants, prompted by the researcher and for the purpose of gathering data—including both existing writing and writing that is created in the research context. The writing can vary in form and length. Its key characteristic is that it is personal and not an official record or a text intended for the public. It is therefore a special form of life writing. As WILLIAMS (2020, §2) outlined, life writing "covers a broad range of narratives including diaries, memoirs and autobiographies, but also autobiographical fiction and novels, and all kinds of literary writing which includes a sort of biographical statement." While some of these genres might be very similar in theme and style, they are written with very different intentions and readerships in mind. For example, autobiographies and personal writing might address similar themes and both shed light on individual and collective experiences and narratives. However, as HEINZE (2011) pointed out, autobiographies are written with the aim of impacting public discourse and collective memory of an event or an era by positioning the author as an expert, such as a politician, a journalist or an artist. They are written with an awareness of their potential to influence the public record of events or a specific era. In that sense, the writing focused upon here is not as broad as the definition of life writing put forward by WILLIAMS (2015). Instead, the kind of writing referred to in this article is not intended for public impact. Examples are personal letters, e-mails and diary entries, as well as extended answers to open questions posed by the researchers. [6]

Standardized questionnaires also often include open-ended questions, for example to address points that have not been mentioned in the structured questions. However, the type of writing as a research method as outlined in this article goes well beyond this. For many of the research projects outlined below, the words written by research participants were the only data gathered. Alternatively, writing can be combined with other research methods such as interviews or focus groups. [7]

Writing as a research method can be used to explore all kinds of themes and topics. However, the literature reviewed here illustrates that writing has been employed in particular when researching difficult, painful, and highly intimate topics that might be taboo, loaded with shame and difficult to *talk* about. For example, HARRIS (2002) has employed "the correspondence method"—letter writing with her research participants—as a way to qualitatively research women who self-harm. HARRIS explained that her "decision to use the correspondence method grew from a failure to establish a meaningful face-to-face dialogue with women engaged in self-harm" (p.5). A core idea of the correspondence method is that for some research participants, it is easier to open up when a listening other is only indirectly present as the addressee of letters. Even having completed the letter or e-mail, one can still choose to eventually send it or not. Removing a listening other from the scene therefore renders the situation less threatening and gives more agency to the inner meanderings of the research participant who

decides themselves which narratives, large or small, can enter the research process and which ones will not be included. [8]

HARRIS asked her research participants to share "'life stories' in general and particularly details of contact with emergency room staff" (p.6). The invitation was intentionally left open, so that the women who chose to correspond with HARRIS could write about "any topic at all concerning their lives" (p.3). HARRIS corresponded with her six research participants over a period of twelve months. She never met them face-to-face but saw her approach to data gathering as a great success: "Although a method borne of necessity, correspondence proved a viable and productive means to gathering data in an otherwise intractable field" (p.4). Interestingly, the most challenging aspect for the researcher was how to respond to the letters and how to position herself while balancing "empathy with the need to steer away from counseling or advice giving [...]" (p.7). Even though no direct help or advice was provided through the researcher, several of the women writing to HARRIS reported that the act of writing the letters was helpful in and of itself. As one research participant put it:

"I feel writing to you helped put the past in some sort of context. Yes, it was bad and awful but seeing it on the paper helped me think about it as past—so I can move on without it" (ibid.). [9]

This observation is reflected by findings from different disciplines: Psychologists have used writing not only as a method of gathering data, but also as a way of providing an intervention for research participants. The goal of the "intervention" is to support research participants in coming to terms with any type of difficulty in their life, modify behavior or bring about change in their way of thinking or acting. The expressive writing paradigm (FRATTAROLI, 2006; PENNEBAKER & CHUNG, 2007) assumes that writing about an issue at stake, any kind of stressful situation or event in the research participant's life, for 15 minutes a day on three to five consecutive days is an effective intervention. FIVUSH (2013) has pointed out that expressive writing interventions within large controlled studies generally show positive results: The majority of participants in such studies have shown higher levels of psychological and physical well-being than control groups. However, the results of such studies have also shown that an expressive writing intervention does not work equally well for all participants and might have negative effects on well-being for some research participants, such as young children, adolescents and some individuals who have recently gone through a traumatic experience (HARVEY, BARNETT & OVERSTREET, 2004). [10]

More generally, writing—be it letter writing, diary writing, or biographical writing—can provide mental relief for the writer. In recent decades, biographical writing about one's family and their past has become popular in the German-speaking context. Often these forms of writing have been accompanied by workshops on "trauma work." Frigga HAUG developed formats within the sociological and feminist tradition to explore a variety of topics (including identities and remembering) while others focus on writing in response to shame and guilt in relation to family histories (e.g., BAER & FRICK-BAER, 2015; BATTKE, 2013). [11]

The correspondence method was also employed by RAUTIO (2009) for her doctoral research on beauty in everyday life in the Sami village of Suvanto in the north of Finland. Similarly to HARRIS, RAUTIO (2009) arrived at the correspondence method after noting that an interview about the meaning of beauty in everyday life fell short:

"In trying out interviewing, I kept asking questions along the lines of 'What do you find beautiful in living here?' and getting very short answers like, 'This is a beautiful village. It sure is. I've lived here since I was a child,' [...]" (p.19). [12]

RAUTIO recruited the research participants after an initial personal meeting in the village. During this meeting the women suggested that everyone's letters were made available for everyone who participated in the project. RAUTIO even participated herself and wrote a monthly letter over the course of twelve months that was also shared with the research participants. This raised challenges about positioning the (researching) self (LOHMEIER, 2009). However, as RAUTIO noted, it also forced her to reflect on the research subject more deeply:

"In retrospect, my letter writing on beauty in my everyday life was rewarding both personally and professionally. My letters now form a systematic research diary of observations followed by theoretical and conceptual wonderings. Having to write once a month putting my words in a way that others would also understand me sped up the conceptual progress of my research" (2009, p.20). [13]

In addition to deepening the process of reflection from the researcher's perspective, another benefit RAUTIO found through this process of data gathering also presented her with very "structured data"—similar to "jotted down notes" (p.30), as she could trace them back to each month's undertaking. An example of examining previously written letters is oral historian THOMSON's (2011) work on the life stories of British women who re-located to Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. Decades later, THOMSON analyzed the letters and subsequently conducted interviews with the four female authors of the letters, referring back to the information he found in their writings and in additional photographs. While this approach is different since the letters were not written as part of the research process as such, they nevertheless also meet the characteristics of telling an absent other about one's current situation and what has happened in the near or distant past. The challenge with this approach is of course to motivate research participants to give their letters to the researcher in the first place. THOMSON was also fortunate to find women who generated a high-volume of letters which had been preserved over time. [14]

For communication and media scholars, letter writing is an unusual method. Yet, one of the seminal works of television and cultural studies, ANG's (1985) "Watching Dallas," exclusively used letters written in response to an advertisement. Her ad in the Dutch women's magazine *Viva* read as follows:

"I like watching the TV serial Dallas, but often get odd reactions to it. Would anyone like to write and tell me why you like watching it too, or dislike it? I should like to assimilate these reactions in my university thesis. Please write to ..." (p.10). [15]

In response, ANG received 42 letters. 39 were written by individuals, mostly women. Three letters were written by co-authors. As ANG briefly discussed, she did not want to take these responses to her ad at face value, but rather read them by "tracing the ideologies and images in the letters" (p.11) in order to understand how a television series is given meaning and, on a more abstract level, how pleasure and ideology interrelate. Summing up, it becomes apparent that writing is often employed where face-to-face conversations are too difficult, painful or simply fall short. Writing also allows the research participants to consider their answer in depth without feeling pressured to immediately provide a response. [16]

3. Methodological Approach to Research Family Memories of the Nazi Era

The previous section provided an overview of how writing has been employed by scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds in order to gather data on shameful, complex and difficult life situations. In this section, I will focus on a project that investigated how memories of the Nazi era are discussed within German families decades after the events. The starting point for the methodological approach is the following question: How can we gather data on intimate and uncomfortable family histories and family communication? The project's aim was to investigate transgenerational memory work within families whose pasts were likely intertwined with the Nazi era. Stories, discussions and various accounts about the Nazi era are simultaneously out in the open and ubiquitous, while simultaneously hidden, secret, scarce and taboo. More specifically, there has been a large volume of historical analysis of the Nazis' rise to power and their rule. Within the German educational context, Second World War history forms an essential part of school curricula. There have been a number of Hollywood blockbusters like "Schindler's List" (SPIELBERG, 1993), "Inglourious Basterds" (TARANTINO, 2009), "The Reader" (DALDRY, 2008) and others that form an essential part of a transnational memory culture representing that era. These texts have been based on actual historical events as well as on fictional stories set in that era. Similarly, television productions led to a revived discussion of national and family memory. A recent addition to televised collective remembering and coming to terms with the Nazi era was "Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter" ["Our mothers, our fathers"; also known in English as "Generation War"] (KADELBACH, 2013). The three-part television film was first broadcast by the German public-service television channel the ZDF and its Austrian equivalent the ORF in March 2013. In addition to the debates about public and private remembering of the Nazi era, the films were criticized in the USA and Poland for the way history was presented, as some viewers likened the style to original Nazi propaganda films. In contrast to the large volume of literature and public discourses about Nazi rule in Germany and the Second World War, findings of this project show that participants' willingness to discuss this era with regards to

their own family history was low and their knowledge about the involvement of their parents and grandparents was very limited and vague. [17]

The research questions for the project on family memory described in this paper were as follows.

1. How do different forms of mediated memories of the Nazi era relate to individual and family memory?
2. What role do memory objects and memory places have in processes of doing memory work?
3. How are these stories passed on to the next generation? How is intergenerational memory work accomplished when it comes to difficult and uncomfortable memories? [18]

Against the backdrop of these research questions, we approached women whose parents and grandparents had first-hand experiences and involvement in the Nazi era and the Second World War while the research participants themselves did not. This means research participants were born between 1949 and around 1960 or between circa 1960 and 1980 respectively. Eleven women completed the questionnaire with open-ended questions. Eight of them agreed to be interviewed. Subsequently, interviews were transcribed in full. While the written material served for preparing the semi-structured interviews, the data gathered through writing and interview transcriptions were treated equally, as both yielded valuable insights to answer the research questions. [19]

In line with the findings of previous studies briefly outlined above, research participants were reluctant to engage with a research project on family history and family memories. Through personal contacts of research assistants in Hamburg and Munich, we approached friends of friends, explaining the project and our methods of data gathering in writing and in subsequent interviews. Moreover, given our approach of asking people to answer open-ended questions in writing, we also approached writing groups. [20]

We faced several hurdles in the process of recruiting research participants: First, an argument made frequently was that the person had nothing to tell us or did not feel qualified to answer questions. Despite our best efforts to assure potential research participants that the questions and any interactions with us would be "on their terms," there was great reluctance. On one occasion, when approaching a writing group in Hamburg, instead of engaging with the topic, people started questioning the sample, ignoring that this was a qualitative explorative study and suggesting that we should have a more varied, wider and "representative sample" of the entire German population. [21]

Participating in a research project can feel like an inconvenience for research participants—another thing to do with no obvious benefit. In essence, there was a great unwillingness to uncover, acknowledge and discuss family histories and the

Nazi era. People who were willing to participate often pointed towards their interest in history and had approached and "worked through" this topic previously. [22]

Despite the challenges in participant recruitment, we managed to find eleven research participants in the end. To gain a deeper understanding of the intergenerational dynamics regarding family communication and participants' relationship with memory objects of the Nazi era, we adapted and combined (biographical) writing with qualitative interviews. Hence, data was gathered in a two-step process. Participants were first asked to answer a set of open-ended questions in writing. Examples of these questions are: How did you learn about what happened in the 1930s and 1940s? Was there a person in your family or in your circle of acquaintances with whom you discussed events from that time? Are there any objects from that era that you or someone in your family has kept over time, like jewelry, photos or old books? The questions were purposefully kept broad and overlapping in subject matter. The first questions were about the person themselves and their experience as a member of that family. In this way, participants were asked to tell us about their family. [23]

In a second step, we conducted a qualitative semi-structured interview (EDWARDS & HOLLAND, 2013; MEY & MRUCK, 2010), based on the data the interviewees had provided in the written material. The advantages of this methodology were the richness of the data, the increased willingness to open up and the opportunity to understand complex extended family structures before speaking to the interviewee. Moreover, the interviewee was able to set the agenda for the interview. Topics that were not mentioned in the written material did not come up in the subsequent interview, unless the interviewee chose to mention it. Certain narratives might have been withheld due to family loyalty. The research participants had to consider whether a particular item was a story, act or judgment about their family they were willing to share. This raises deeper questions about ownership of family stories and the entitlement to share them with someone else. [24]

A further methodological advantage of this approach was that this form of letter writing allowed research participants to write in a place of their choice and in a familiar environment. There was only an "imagined other." There was no researcher sitting across from the participant, inquiring about they had just said. With the methodological approach described, this of course changed in the interview. However, the interview questions were individualized for each interviewee, so they only addressed topics already mentioned in the participants' writing. There was no probing or searching for further "hidden" secrets. The two-step process generated a great amount of rich data which was mirrored in the data analysis. First, the written material was read closely several times to prepare for the interview and individualize the questions. It was particularly helpful to gain an understanding of the family in advance because these often turned out to be rather complex (due to family members dying during the Second World War, sexual affairs or men returning home after having been a prisoner of war for several years, to name but a few examples). A complete analysis of the material—the writing, the transcript of the interview and any notes taken or photos of

memory objects made during the interview—was subsequently coded manually in the tradition of CORBIN and STRAUSS (2014). [25]

Once research participants were on board, in many cases, there was a great openness to discuss and explore. Many of the research participants provided feedback that they had in fact enjoyed taking part and reflecting on these issues regarding their family history and the (non-)transmission of memories, secrets and experiences of previous generations. The main disadvantages were the extended time it took to gather data and—due to the sensitive topic—the great reluctance of potential participants to take part. [26]

4. Recommendations and Reflections

From the experience of researching family secrets and uncomfortable family narratives, several recommendations can be made. It is particularly advisable to first invite the participant to submit open-ended, biographical writing before conducting a qualitative interview when the researcher would benefit from a thorough understanding of family relations in preparation for the interview. Moreover, the approach supported the exploratory nature of the research project by giving interviewees the opportunity to put their own emphases when responding to the writing prompts. Examples of these types of prompts are: "Why was it difficult to talk about the Nazi era in your family?" and "How did you learn about what your parents did during the Nazi era?" The interviewee can take an active role in determining what will be addressed and decide what they are willing to disclose, while the interviewer can prepare thoroughly, for example by following leads from the written data. [27]

A key recommendation is to reiterate to the participants several times that the writing itself will not be judged in terms of spelling, grammar or expression. By including writing in the research process, research participants might feel wary of "handing in their work" to a teacher or a tutor. Therefore, it was certainly an advantage that research assistants in their early- to mid-twenties communicated with the participants, as they had little resemblance to strict teachers, and were very successful in helping research participants feel comfortable. [28]

During the process of writing, participants might encounter the usual challenges that many writers, including academic writers, are familiar with: meeting the inner critic, struggling to find the right words, challenges of procrastination and worrying that the writing is not good enough. Keeping these dynamics in mind, we did not ask participants to start with a blank page and just write about their family, their family history and their family's secrets and taboos. We provided them with a number of open-ended questions that purposefully overlapped in the themes they addressed. [29]

Nevertheless, it still holds true that those who were willing to participate in such a project were well-educated, reflective and informed individuals. In other words, they had informed opinions about history and some even had a keen interest in it,

which increased their willingness to participate. As in other research projects outlined in Section 2, the participants were self-selected. [30]

Writing starts an internal process of thinking, remembering and sense-making. It causes emotions and even bodily reactions that could be pleasant or uncomfortable and unwanted. We were keenly aware of this, keeping in close contact with research participants. An advantage of following up the writing part with an interview was the extensive data we were able to gain on research participants. It also meant that research participants did not feel removed or temporally disconnected. HARRIS mentions these aspects as a negative side effect when data is only gathered through correspondence and no personal meetings take place:

"One of the frustrating aspects of the correspondence method concerns the 'one step removed' aspects of this means of data collection. For example, in the self-harm study, women often wrote highly charged emotional letters that appear to have been painful to write (many were tear-stained)" (2002, p.12). [31]

For both, the researcher and the research participant, the other side becomes somewhat invisible. Meeting in person for a face-to-face interview counteracted this effect and also gave a sense of completeness to the research process. In concluding, I want to consider the question of whether asking people to write something—be it a letter or an e-mail—is still relevant in the modern day. Some of the participants decided to handwrite their answers. Others decided to type and send their answers via e-mail. When gathering data digitally, it seems odd or old-fashioned to ask people to write more than a couple of sentences. Especially writing a longer text by hand and sending a letter in the mail is no longer very common and risks the potential pitfall of research participants forgetting to post the letter or it getting lost. However, gathering data in this perhaps slightly outdated style still has its place and might even attract some people to participate. RAUTIO states that

"the motivation for the participants to engage in this research seems to have come from expecting a complete year of their lives written down at the end of the research and from a feeling that they were doing something together when also reading each others' [sic] letters" (2009, p.30). [32]

Even though RAUTIO's sample was small, consisting of only four women, the research process accomplished something rare: It gave research participants a sense of being part of the project and contributing to answering a larger question. It also provided a sense of their own lives, views and opinions being valued and being seen. [33]

Given the topics that are predestined for data gathering through writing, these aspects should not be underestimated. On the contrary, more technologically advanced forms of data gathering, for example through online questionnaires and digital data collection, pose the challenge that they introduce other forms of visibility and invisibility on both sides of the table, for the researcher and the

research participant. FIVUSH has called for smaller "in-depth 'thick' studies of narrative that allow close investigation of the narrative being told, the individual doing the telling, and the context of telling" (2013, p.17). The findings stemming from this type of research can, in turn, be used to inform large-scale studies and interventions. Despite the considerable amount of time and energy expended by the researchers to obtain a small sample, the aim of this article was to illustrate how research on hidden and opaque areas of life can benefit from writing as a way to gather data. [34]

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